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Making the history of french tennis and its federation

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ABSTRACT

Imported to Dinard in 1875 and played by the elites of the Belle Époque, tennis became a national passion in the 1920s. The press, radio, and cinematographic newsreels magnify the exploits of Suzanne Lenglen and the Musketeers. During the 1950s and 1960s, French tennis seemed to be falling asleep, but new clubs were already appearing. The conversion of the middle classes to the practice of tennis then accelerated, reaching its peak with the victory of Yannick Noah at Roland-Garros in 1983, and France in the Davis Cup in 1991. One of the first sports federations to become independent in 1920, the lawn-tennis federation was for a long time content to legislate and organize competitions at the regional and national level. But, with the transition to the Open era (1968), the French Tennis Federation (FFT) created a unique model for the development of its sport by drawing on the profits generated by the Roland-Garros tournament it owns. Clubs that are more than a hundred years old, old federal magazines and bulletins, the pedagogies of the master-teachers of yesteryear and the coaches of today, federal politics, the trajectories of its fourteen presidents, heritage and sponsors, exchanges beyond borders, here is an invitation to revisit 150 years of France's history with a racket in hand.

Key words: French Tennis Federation; history; governance; Centenary Clubs

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INTRODUCTION

In 2025, the French Tennis Federation (FFT) celebrated both the centenary of the France Open and the 150th anniversary of the first tennis balls exchanged on French soil in 1875. While there are many histories of tennis in France that focus on the Roland-Garros tournament, its champions, and the epics of the Davis Cup, it failed to take the measure of the role played by the federation and its leaders in the expansion of this sport, which has become the second largest in France in terms of the number of its licenses (behind football) and the first in terms of individual and mixed sports.

This book is not a federal novel but the result of the work of historians, to whom the FFT has opened its archives and provided a large iconographic collection. In France, the FFT is indeed the first single-sport federation to entrust the writing of its history, not to communicators, but to academics. The result is a constructed, distanced and useful narrative for those who want to understand the complex contexts in which federal policies have been deployed since the establishment of tennis in France. Beyond the collection of facts and events, the proposed narrative is fully social, cultural, economic and even political. While it focuses on the emergence of tennis at the end of the nineteenth century to its modern organization, it is open to all the dynamics of French society from the 1870s to the present day.

This book is written in five parts (5 sets) with 32 chapters, the first four progressing chronologically, the last one being devoted to the heritage of French tennis and the pioneer clubs. Its backbone is articulated around federal policies in France and beyond, portraits of presidents, official bulletins placed in the publishing economy of tennis, exchanges beyond borders, forms taken by tennis teaching and high-level production, partners and sponsors. The periodization adopted was punctuated by the establishment of seaside tennis in 1875, the creation of the federation in 1920, the arrival in 1953 of a series of leaders who, for the first time, were not former champions, and the seizure of power in 1968 by Marcel Bernard and Philippe Chatrier who would carry the Open revolution.

Figure 1. *Aerial view of the Philippe-Chatrier court and the Roland-Garros stadium, 2024*

FIRST SET: FRENCH TENNIS BEFORE ITS FEDERATION (1875-1920)

The first part of the book allows us to analyze the prerequisites for the creation of the French Lawn Tennis Federation (FFLT) in 1920.

In chapter 1, Serge Vaucelle places the history of tennis in the long term of racquet sports from the short palm of the Renaissance princes to the recent arrival of padel. This is all the more useful because, on the one hand, short palm players were among the first "tennis players" (Émile Broquedis and Martin Plaa) and, on the other hand, this "game of kings" has bequeathed to modern tennis several of its characteristics: the counting of points from 15 to 15 which inspired the handicap ranking system, naming of the shots played (forehand, backhand, serve), vocabulary, layout of the playing field, although initially asymmetrical, expressions from the French language ("amuser la galerie", "faire faux bond", "qui va à la chasse perd sa place" to illustrate). The author does not spare the history of all the other games of long palm, ball in hand, pelota, sieve and tambourine that have survived to the present day in conservatories of practices that correspond to the former royal provinces. These traditional games were even formed into multiple French federations between the 1900s and 1930s and continue their existence until today.

Readers are then immersed in the atmosphere of the Belle Époque when tennis came to the beaches (Chapter 2, Jean-Michel Peter). Tennis as a physical and cultural novelty allows the racing elites to distinguish themselves and recognize themselves, from the seaside resorts of the North Sea and the Normandy or Aquitaine coasts to the palaces of the Côte d'Azur via the western districts of Paris. The establishment of the first tennis courts in Dinard, Dinan, Paris and Nice and, by extension, seaside tennis, was determined primarily by the development of sports and tourist leisure activities. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a new market was created at the intersection of industrial boom, improved transport (railways), the island's tradition of outdoor activities and the appetite of the British upper classes for physical, recreational and hygienic practices. With their well-known role as ambassadors of modern sports, English expatriates and tourists are the leading exporters of new sports and leisure activities, including yachting, tennis and golf. It was also the French law on freedom of association of 1901 that contributed to the development of tennis, even if the beginnings were to be credited to the "leisure class". In the end, the spread of tennis in France during the Belle Époque was at the interface of recreational tennis, sports shows that attracted crowds after the war, and the proliferation of clubs. But before 1914, tennis also developed in the French colonies, a privileged space for its expansion among the colonial elites who admired the British model (Chapter 4, Claude Boli).

Figure 2. *Seaside tennis in Pornichet*

Business magazines at the heart of federal tennis

Taking the tennis press and official bulletins as a focus is a good introduction to understanding the evolution of the federal administration. Also, one of the innovative contributions of this book concerns the close relations forged between the owners of the tennis trade magazines and the federal leaders (Chapters 5, 12 and 15, Patrick Clastres). This cohabitation between magazines sold on newsstands and federal bulletins results in a creative tension where the control of information is essential, sometimes to conquer and retain a clientele of readers and advertisers, sometimes to ensure hegemony over the organization of French tennis.

In 1910, Max Decugis launched the first magazine of its kind sold on newsstands and entitled Tennis Organe du lawn-tennis en France. Many federal leaders break into the specialized magazines created by champions and enthusiasts to impose their discourse and their power, while editors-in-chief, often also very good players, use their newspaper as a platform to try to conquer federal power. The magazines Tennis by Max Decugis and Tennis et Golf by Marcel Daninos (1914 and 1920) not only initiated the promotion of professional tennis against amateur doctrine, they also played a role in the genesis of the FFLT.

After the Revue du Tennis et du Badminton launched in 1929 by Quiry, other commercial magazines were created during the interwar period: Tennis-Sports, which was carried at arm's length by the master-teachers from December 1929 to February 1930, or Smash by René Mathieu, which had the misfortune to be launched in June 1939. This editorial golden age reflects the enthusiasm of the media and the French for the exploits of Suzanne Lenglen and then the Musketeers. However, it does not mean that the practice of tennis became more democratic at the time.

SECOND SET: THE MUSKETEERS' FOOTPRINT (1920-1953)

Until the end of the Great War, there were no real sports federations in France (Chapter 3, Patrick Clastres): the different sports were organized into separate committees that made up the Union of French Athletic Sports Societies (USFSA). The FFLT broke away from the USFSA to become a fully independent sports federation with the filing of the statutes on 9 November 1920 and a declaration in the Official Journal of the French Republic on 26 November 1920 (Chapter 6, Patrick Clastres and Lionel Crognier). On December 17, 1920, the constitutive meeting of the FFLT council also validated the elections of the delegates of the regional committees, which are the ancestors of the leagues. It is one of the challenges of the FFLT's operation to represent the provinces and their involvement in decision-making.

Another issue that spanned the century until the 1980s was the definitions of amateur and professional. Suzanne Lenglen's conversion to professionalism in 1926 put the FFLT's positions in tension. Bitter debates took place again during the 1950s and 1960s, and they faded with the opening of Roland-Garros to professionals in 1968 (Open era). This revolution was largely due to the tenacious commitment of Philippe Chatrier, who secured the return of tennis to the Olympic Games in 1988 and became a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

The construction of a large stadium dedicated to tennis was the essential starting point to be able to welcome a large audience and switch to spectator sport. This was due to the advent of a men's team made up of four players called "The Musketeers" by the press (Brugnon, Borotra, Cochet and Lacoste). The latter won the silver bowl six times from 1927 to 1932 in the wake of Suzanne Lenglen's exploits and made the Roland-Garros stadium the place of memory of French tennis. After their first victory in 1927 in Philadelphia, the FFLT acquired a new stadium located at the Porte d'Auteuil to host the Davis Cup final the following year, to the point of opening up new perspectives for the development of French tennis (Chapters 6 and 8). In addition to this architectural inscription in the Parisian landscape with the centre court enclosure as we still know it today, the Davis Cup victory was in many ways decisive for the history of the federation. The influence exerted by the Musketeers on the history of the FFLT and French tennis would continue in the decades that followed. If their career was somewhat mythologized - most often they played with an incomplete team, with 3 more than 4 - the fact remains that the choice of the stadium, which is the property of the federation, proved to be wise to conquer greater legitimacy in French sport and vis-à-vis the public authorities.

The rediscovery of former presidents and master-professors

Several major players in the institutionalization of French tennis were still unknown, especially those before 1968. The biographical notes of the fourteen presidents, which are scattered throughout the pages (Chapters 7, 9, 14, 16, 18, 20), are particularly unpublished and enlightening. These portraits not only include their careers as players and managers, they also consider their social origins and professional destinies. Their profiles, spread over a century and a half, bear witness to the sociological shift from the eminent elites of the capital to the bourgeoisie and middle classes of the southern regions. Moreover, it is not insignificant for the balance of power that is at stake, at the national and international levels, that half of the fourteen presidents are players who have reached the first French series, i.e. the best national level (Albert Canet, Pierre Gillou, René Lacoste, Raymond Rödel, Marcel Bernard, Philippe Chatrier, Gilles Moretton). Several of these biographies deal with the proximity of the federation to certain governments, during the dark years of the Vichy regime as well as during the Glorious Thirty. Françoise Taliano-des Garets (Chapter 8) notes a great continuity of the federation's policy and the stability of the leaders of the Musketeers' generation beyond the Vichy regime. But the federation also has its war heroes, Simonne Mathieu and Bernard Destremeau, in particular. The years 1920 to 1950 were those of a sustained development of competitive tennis in North Africa, from which a number of champions emerged (Chapter 10, Claude Boli). The benefit of the growth of tournaments in North Africa allowed the emergence of local players including Robert Abdesselam, Gilbert Naccache, the brothers Pierre and Maurice Darmon, and Françoise Dürr, the winner of Roland-Garros in 1967.

The teaching of tennis was a concern that continued to progress in the minds of the leaders of the FFLT from the beginning of the 1920s (Chapter 11, Lionel Crognier). Henri Wallet, the first president (1920-1924) was thus imbued with the need to train young people to compete with the English and the Americans. Very early on, the progressiveness of the teaching was based on three levels (initiation, improvement, training) before being enriched by an initial stage in 1990: mini-tennis. The profession was organized in 1925 in connection with the rise of professional tennis. Initially, the elite of the trade, the famous master teachers, were the holders of the secrets of the moves and gave primacy to style and technique in individual lessons. However, group initiations developed after the launch in 1935 of the first tennis school, then in 1942 of the school tennis initiation centres, and finally with the dissemination of Suzanne Lenglen's Method (1942). Henri Cochet is fully involved, both in France and in North Africa, to transmit knowledge born of his practice at the highest level. However, it was not until the 1960s that the idea of being able to "learn tennis" took hold, going beyond the beautiful style taught to a privileged audience.

THIRD SET: A FEDERATION IN TRANSITION (1953-1968)

Guy de Bazillac's presidential decade (1953-1963) and the shorter terms of his two successors, Robert Soisbault (1963-1966) and Roger Cirotteau (1966-1968), were forgotten, if not discredited. This oversight can be explained by the prestige of their predecessor Pierre Gillou (1931-1941 and 1947-1953), the captain of the Musketeers, and by the exceptional transformations that French tennis underwent under their successor Philippe Chatrier (1973-1993). Moreover, itis commonly accepted that the latter carried out a "revolution in French tennis" from his conquest of the federation in December 1968 alongside Marcel Bernard. Without questioning this reality, the third set (Patrick Clastres, Chapters 13 to 16) rehabilitates these three presidencies as years of transition where conservatism and reforms are intertwined. The author returns to this discredit, which can be compared to that of the regime of the Fourth Republic orchestrated by General de Gaulle.

These fifteen years were punctuated by the attacks launched by Philippe Chatrier's magazine Tennis de France against the rule of amateurism maintained by the International Federation with the support of the French leaders. The monthly created in 1953 made it possible to build a group

of editors and contributors who would ensure the success of the journal and would be able to familiarize readers with new ideas carried by a dream team that would take power in 1968 (Chapter 15). Thus, Philippe Chatrier embodies a liberal and entrepreneurial vision against leaders who have been in place for a quarter of a century and are presented as backward-looking. In these years 1953-1968, however, we note the growth in the number of players, the increase in licenses, a boom in tennis schools, the emergence of champions such as Pierre Darmon, Pierre Barthès, Annie Soisbault, and Françoise Dürr. Who remembers that Ginette Bucaille was a finalist at Roland-Garros in 1954? Under the presidencies of General de Gaulle (1958-1969), the French Ministry of Youth and Sports, then in gestation, did not remain completely passive in supporting equipment projects and in making Gil de Kermadec in 1963 the first National Technical Director (DTN) of French sport, i.e. the first official in charge of high level sport.

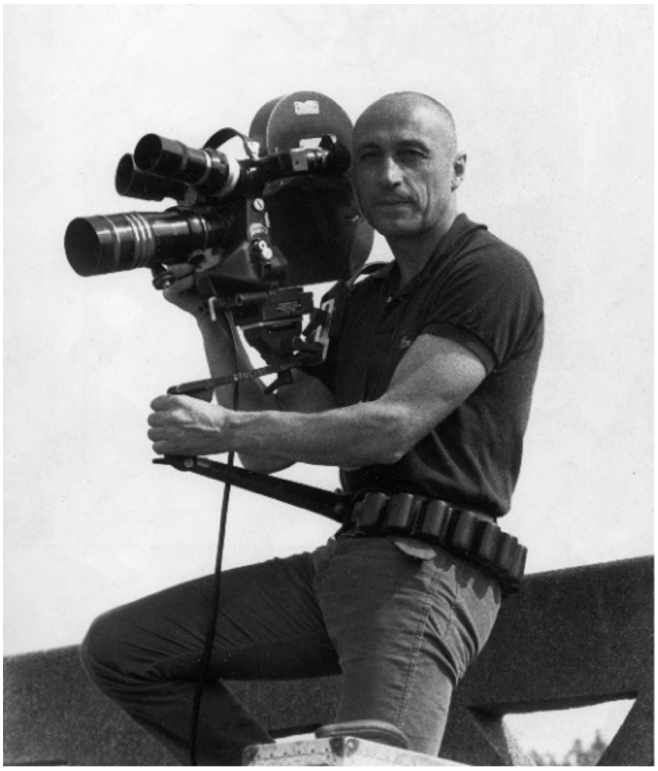

Figure 3. *Gil de Kermadec on camera*

FOURTH SET: THE MODERNIZATIONS OF FRENCH TENNIS (1968-2025)

The fourth set opens with Emmanuel Bayle's analysis (Chapter 17) of the profound reforms on the sporting, commercial and managerial levels led by presidents Marcel Bernard (1968-1972) and Philippe Chatrier (1973-1993). This chapter is pivotal in understanding the continuity of federal policy over the past half century, as the following 4 presidencies (Christian Bîmes, Jean Gachassin, Bernard Giudicelli, Gilles Moretton) have not fundamentally modified or renounced the line defined in 1968.

Marcel Bernard, winner of the France Open in 1946, and Philippe Chatrier, former French number 6, arrived at the presidency of the FFLT in an extremely favourable economic and social context with a development of tennis already launched by their predecessors and beginning to benefit from State aid. Tennis then became a social phenomenon widely broadcast on television (from 1972) and whose practice became commonplace throughout France.

The "Chatrier revolution" was based on four key points set out in 1968: to increase the number of courts and players by paying attention to the development of school tennis, to provide the federation with a modern management structure, to give more autonomy to the leagues and to prepare future champions by taking the example of Australian tennis. In order to make an impression on public opinion, Philippe Chatrier is betting on both the France Davis Cup team and the profound transformation of the Roland-Garros stadium into a "large national centre with covered courts, accommodation for trainees or national teams, federal offices". A clear management principle was adopted for this federation, which until then had been very unprofessional: a collective and united management that associated the league presidents and delegated the technical and operational management of files to salaried executives. The policy of decentralization of resources found its full effectiveness with the creation of the leagues in the 1970s, including in Corsica and in the French overseas departments (Claude Boli, Chapter 21).

The Porte d'Auteuil tournament became a first-rate promotional and financial tool. The FFLT, renamed FFT in 1976, was then the only French individual sports federation to own and organise a major media event. Since the early 1980s, its economic model has been based almost exclusively on Roland-Garros, which generates between 80% and 85% of federal resources. The continuously increasing results gave the FFT a particularly stable and comfortable financial situation, which allowed it to renovate its stadium, which was in a pitiful state at the end of the 1970s, and then to gradually extend the site above and below ground.

Fifty years later, in the age of globalisation and digitalisation, four major challenges await the federation (Chapter 19, Emmanuel Bayle): to continue to optimise the profitability of the new Roland-Garros during and outside the tournament, to maintain the density of the high-level while bringing out exemplary and inspiring champions, to succeed in the new territorial organisation for a better overall governance of tennis, and finally to strengthen the attractiveness of tennis and the new associated disciplines (beach tennis, padel, pickleball, etc.) to the population by boosting the life of the clubs.

A French originality: the federation's manufacture of champions

The "Chatrier revolution" could not be completely achieved without a high-level sporting policy that would make it possible to rediscover the lost golden age of the Musketeers and to reconquer the silver bowl of the Davis Cup. The FFT is counting on the creation of a federal network to manufacture champions in tennis-studies whereas, in most other countries, the courses are most often made outside the federation, relying on family, sponsors or private academies.

It was from the appointment in 1963 of the first DTN that the strategies for structuring the training sector were set (Chapter 22, Lionel Crognier). The DTNs who succeed Gil de Kermadec (Jean-Paul Loth, Patrice Dominguez, Jean-Claude Massias, in particular), continue to implement a model of access to the elite that makes France a successful nation to lead young people into the Top 100. Federal pedagogy was then considered both as a prescription from above through the teaching method of 1972 but also as the result

of teachings built empirically by master teachers, champions and all the new players in the clubs. DTN until 1976, Gil de Kermadec brilliantly revealed this knowledge through the kinograms he published in Tennis de France and the making of educational films. He benefits from his travels abroad as well as from the contributions of sports science and training. His large-scale project is to combine cinema and tennis, around the style, technique and personality of the champions. Gil de Kermadec's plethoric work constitutes a true memory of international tennis, with a brilliant filmic writing from the silent film of 1966 presenting the elementary technical basics from slow-motion gestures, to the match between McEnroe and Lendl in 1984 at Roland-Garros.

Finally, by combining State aid (new diplomas, State staff made available, development of sports-study classes in middle and high schools, public tennis facilities and courts) and the financial resources emanating from the Roland-Garros tournament, the FFT has set up a training course with convincing results from the 1980s to the present day. The brilliant careers of Yannick Noah and Amélie Mauresmo, as well as the victories in the Davis Cup and Fed Cup attest to this (Chapter 23).

Figure 4. *Yannick Noah, 1991 Davis Cup*

Bertrand Pulman (Chapter 24) then addresses an essential issue for the development of federal tennis, in connection with the internationalisation of the Roland-Garros brand, that of advertisements, advertisements and other commercial sponsorships to demonstrate both its age and its importance. He recalls that the founder of Tennis de France has chosen to recruit professionals to set up a global commercial partnership strategy whose challenge is to satisfy and retain partners. None of his successors will lose sight of these objectives, when bringing a partnership to life all year round - and not only during the peak of Roland-Garros - will be a more topical issue.

FIFTH SET: HERITAGE AND PIONEER CLUBS

Heritage and pioneer clubs are in the spotlight in the 5th set. In the space of a century, the FFT has acquired a cultural, artistic and architectural heritage made up of remarkable movable and immovable property. Françoise Germaix-Wasserman and Henri Wasserman (Chapter 25) take hold of one of the most beautiful collections, the posters of the Tournament, to retrace a whole section of the history of art and sport. The Federation has indeed pictorial works of first value: paintings, engravings, and drawings ranging from the nineteenth century to the present day such as The Palm Players in the Jardin du Luxembourg by Gustave Doré (1866) or The Portrait of Chris Evert made in 1977 by Andy Warhol in the same spirit as the portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor. Under the aegis of its president Christian Bîmes, a vast acquisition policy was launched by the FFT for the opening of the Tenniseum, the federal museum which was inaugurated on 25 May 2003. The 2017 museographic inventory lists nearly 12,976 items listed.

Tennis clubs and leagues also have their own collections and history. This is what Patrick Clastres reminds us (Chapter 26) by offering advice to enthusiasts wishing to do historical research and promote their finds. Serge Vaucelle (Chapter 27) then evokes the last short palm clubs still active in France (Fontainebleau, Paris, Bordeaux, Pau, Bayonne) whose activity is coordinated by a Committee that has been part of the FFLT since its creation in 1920. Finally, and this is an essential and promising contribution, twelve researchers have joined forces to tell the story of the birth and first developments of 34 century-old clubs, some of which have disappeared. While the capital and the seafronts are particularly represented because they were the gateways to tennis in France during the Belle Époque, the inland cities are not forgotten, whether they are spa resorts or regional metropolises. Even if so many local stories remain to be written, the return of clubs to the center of the game is eminently welcome (Chapters 28 to 32).

CONCLUSION

With the end of false amateurism and the transition to the Open era in 1968, the French Tennis Federation created a unique model for the development of its sport by drawing on the profits generated by the Roland-Garros tournament that it owns and that it can redistribute to the regional leagues. The continued success of the tournament and its commercialisation have made it possible to continue the professionalisation of the FFT and its decentralised bodies, but also to renovate and build a new, modernised Roland-Garros stadium. Despite a turbulent and sometimes conflictual governance since 1993, competition from a large number of sports and leisure activities and the evolution of the leisure practices of French youth, the FFT remains one of the major French sports federations and a major player in international tennis. Despite many ups and downs and power struggles, the FFT has played a decisive and positive role in the evolution of the game and the democratisation of its practice.

Because it manages to articulate, in the long term, the national, regional and local levels, this book is already a reference for tennis lovers and enthusiasts as well as for researchers and all those who wish to better understand the trajectories and developments of sports federations. Even if the history of champions was not part of the project of this book, it is probably the most complete ever published on the history of tennis in France and its federation. Last but not least, the reader will enjoy consulting this beautiful large format book of 335 pages, with cardboard cover and glossy paper, embellished with more than 200 often unpublished photographs and a very extensive index of more than 1200 names of people and names of clubs, committees and leagues which facilitates reading and encourages future studies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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View of the new Centre Court with the Musketeers' Garden. Philippe Montigny-FFT

Pornichet tennis on the square. All rights reserved. Jean-Michel Peter Collection.

Gil de Kermadec on camera. 1960. Gil de Kermadec-FFT.

Yannick Noah carried in triumph, Davis Cup final, December 1, 1991. Christophe Guibbaud-FFT

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